The Unicorn as Lifelong Companion: Remixing Inclusive and Intergenerational Art Education Journeys with the Freedom of Froebel and Wildness of Waldorf

"Concepts of the unicorn speak to the aspiration of art educators to continuously channel joy and cultivate imagination in the classroom."

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ABSTRACT
In what ways can the symbol of the unicorn represent and inform collaborative, intergenerational visions of art education? This paper outlines some of the roles of the unicorn as a theme and a framework for contemporary applications of art education relating to enduring Froebelian art education, Waldorf-inspired art teaching, and inclusive community art practice as a form of remix. This research seeks to illuminate enduring but oft-neglected areas of inspiring art curriculum for teachers and learners across the lifespan.

KEYWORDS
Unicorns, Froebel, Waldorf, art history, intergenerational learning

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How can the symbol of the unicorn both reflect and inform inclusive visions of art education across the lifespan and generations? The unicorn is a legendary, magical creature of both Eastern and Western artistic and literary origins: from mentions in the bible, to ancient philosopher Ctesias' descriptions of a white horned animal in India, and unicorn-like bronze statues in Ethiopia (Hunt, 2003). It occupies a space in a varied visual timeline in art history, as well as fairy tales, film, memes, mythology, and other popular culture. The unicorn is a symbol of myth and impossibility, also linked with the creative imagination in art and literature (Wriglesworth, 2006), and the creative practices of psychoanalysis (Williams, 2010). Conceptually, the word unicorn (Latin: *unicornis*) is also a term for something elusive and sought-after, like art education itself, which can be rare and precious in K-12 schools, universities, and arts centers for learners of all ages.

Throughout my own childhood, unicorns served me as companions to a world of art and symbolism across genres and artistic media, from the seven silken *Unicorn Tapestries* of medieval France, to Tolkienesque unicorn paintings by the brothers Hildebrandt, to the animated film The Last Unicorn (Bass & Rankin,1982) and flying unicorns or "pegacorns" from *My Little Pony* (Hasbro, 1986). In college, I would discover Damien Hurst's *The Child's Dream* from 2008 - a luminous white taxidermy horse with a horn attached, and Betye Saar's supernatural and subversive etching: *To Catch a Unicorn* (1960). With a dual background in Art and in English Literature, I also relished Audre Lorde's poetry anthology, *The Black Unicorn* (1978), which uniquely "portrays the emergence of a coherent, magical Black feminist heritage" (Leonard, 2012, p. 759).

Beyond my own enduring interest, I was surprised to notice that both my adult graduate students and elementary students today share a fascination with unicorns, sometimes overlapping (e.g. shared nostalgia for medieval iconography of unicorns) and at other times distinct from one another (e.g. adults creating diverse unicorn remixes ironically). As a midcareer art education professor with students from their early 20s through retirement age, I have observed graduate students discussing unicorns symbolically, as a metaphor for teaching art. I often hear good- natured quips about my students' love of "unicorn teachers" as a form of kitsch - with the teacher as a stand-in for a rare and often rainbowed classroom character who might even wear unicorn-related fashion and accessories.

Being called a unicorn can be a badge of honor for oneself, or often extended affectionately to a quirky mentor or colleague who is rare, like a unicorn. Many common gifts for teachers bear imagery and phraseology that celebrate the unicorn teacher through new and old imagery, fonts, and messages, often remixed from stylized imagery of a horn or unicorn silhouette. So too, a popular coffee mug features a U.S. representative riding a unicorn in front of a rainbow, above the words "I believe in AOC" (LookHuman, 2020).

Maxine Greene's foundational text, *Releasing the Imagination,* reminds us as teachers to look to children and their "images of possibility" (2000, p. 53) that include unicorns and elves, as we encourage the development of both perception and imagination.

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Elaborating on mythic metaphors ascribed to art educators more poetically, Smith-Shank (2014) thoughtfully wrote of the contrast between beloved arts teachers and "dragon teachers" that could dramatize and serve as an inverse counterpart to unicorn teachers. I have found such concepts of the unicorn speak to the aspirations of art educators to continuously channel joy and cultivate imagination in the classroom. Unicorns taught in art history cultivate fantasy and escapism, inspiring artistic interests across the lifespan.

During a recent community workshop on fairy tale art, elementary students demonstrated interest in a range of unicorn imagery from medieval art to contemporary television (Figure 1). My co-author, Carlee Bradbury, an art historian, and I were inspired by discussions during the workshop of how children might use the unicorn books they carefully created in an intergenerational exchange, such as reading to a younger sibling, or sharing drawings with a parent. Further, the comments of mothers who joined the workshop reflected a certain legacy of shared love for these magical creatures: a bond of myth, magic, and hopefulness across generations.

Figure 1. Image of 2018 community workshop materials at Harvard University's Ed Portal.

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Following along with the ideas of our young students, we have continued to investigate how the unicorn can serve as a timely and timeless cultural and artistic phenomenon evoking both nostalgia for past mythologies of unicorns and dragons and visions of futuristic fantasy. Unicorns can also be complex symbols of the shifting individual human psyche. The symbolism of the unicorn as an isolated figure sometimes reflecting depression in the artist has been noted by psychologists observing the work of young creative people (Edwards, 2005). In our teaching, we have found that the unicorn's temporal flexibility makes for a useful and versatile metaphor for the blending of past, present, and future aspirations and longings of art education, including certain experiences of otherness and diversity, for learners of all ages.

My colleague and I also observed that while students were looking at images from art history and rendering their own images of unicorns, they were also talking about the unicorn aesthetically in terms of its rareness, wildness, and magical qualities. We could not help but share our own unicorn stories, which complemented theirs. The dialogue and creation processes that ensued were accompanied by an unabashed love of their beauty or even cuteness. This range of visual meaning shows the unicorn's leaps from medieval art history to fantasy and fan art; bridging gaps between sanctioned spaces of art history and emerging commercial and/or outsider fandoms that speak to the broad appeal of unicorns and of different types of art.

Drawing on art education histories addressing young learners to adults, this article outlines some of the roles of the unicorn as a framework for contemporary applications of Froebel-inspired art education, Waldorf-inspired art teaching, and adult art practice as a form of collaborative and inclusive remix. By analyzing these eclectic influences on our field, we aim to deepen inquiries into intergenerational art education histories and illuminate possibilities of collaborative art curricula.

Unicorns: From Art History to Art Education Histories and Aesthetics Education

Unicorns' histories offer a rich visual and historical references, connecting art history with arts education histories and visions over time. Apart from Christian references widely addressed elsewhere in art history, the iconic *Unicorn Tapestrie*s evoke mysteries of the very origins of the work and its many potential meanings. Tate Museum director, Martin Clark, described the unicorn comprehensively as "a powerful symbol of good in early pagan mythology
. . . still associated with fairytales" (Kennedy, 2009, para. 3). As part of our analysis, we searched for and collected several medieval and medieval-inspired images of unicorns,

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including the *Unicorn Tapestries* in a Pinterest board (Figure 2). We observed throughout this imagery that unicorns in visual culture often evoke and honor the past through antique gold jewelry and medieval scenery. On the other hand, unicorns can also represent an otherworldly, often futuristic quality in the shimmering rainbows noted by Perea (2015) as a 1980s rainbowed unicorn aesthetic of girlhood vis a vis Lisa Frank's colorful Trapper Keeper designs. Indeed, unicorns are interpreted variously throughout fairy tales, children's television, fantasy/science fiction films, and illustrations viewed/consumed by adolescents and adults.

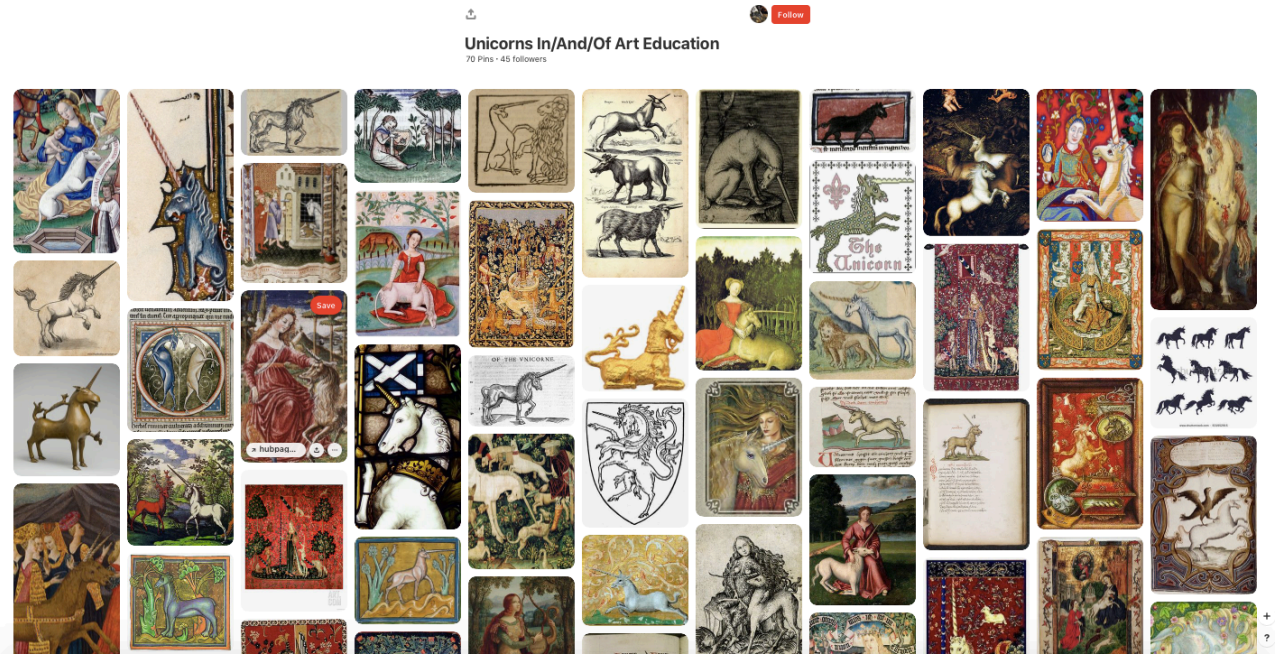

Figure 2. Screenshot of Pinterest board compiled by the authors.

Rather than relegate unicorns purely to youth cultures or fantasy genres, an unofficial unicorn history asserts that these creatures have fascinated several noted historical figures: from Aristotle, to Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Julius Caesar (Ang, 2014). This resource makes for an interesting research guide for students investigating the origin of unicorns, with a sampling of related imagery from art history alongside popular culture. Additionally, the symbolism of unicorns is present in media that appeals to readers and film goers across all ages. For example, unicorns appear in the *Harry Potter* films and books, which appeal to fans at every stage of life as evidenced by fan letters from children and as well as the elderly (Zalon, 2011). In *Harry Potter*, a plot device relies on the mythology that blood from a unicorn grants eternal life, but results in damned existence because the blood of a magical creature was shed (Stojilkov, 2015).

Unicorns also enjoy a form of immortality across the years of lesson plans, including serious art historical explorations of the *Unicorn Tapestries* in the instructional resource for art educators by Cole, Lambert, Presley, York, and Cappetta's (1989). I have similarly observed recreations of unicorns from heraldry and coins in elementary school art rooms, which reveal the influence of historic unicorn symbols from Scotland (Knox-Shaw, 1997).

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Inspired by more contemporary artists, there are also brilliantly colored unicorn fantasy art lessons inspired by designer Lisa Frank, or similar artists like Peter Max (e.g. Hinton, 2012). Further, art education researcher Baxter (2019) celebrates "the rainbows and unicorns" (para. 5) of lesson planning itself, when educators focus on deep creativity over the standardization and tedium that curriculum creation can entail.

Unicorns appear prominently in art education histories as well, as the subject of a model inquiry for the theorizing of children's sense of aesthetics. Freeman (1996) describes a "unicorn problem" (p. 201) through arts research with eleven and seven-year-old children. Children were asked how someone can know a picture of a unicorn is beautiful if one has never seen an actual unicorn. Many of the students could not articulate how to prove the beauty of the unicorn in absence of other reference points. Only one student noted the way in which the picture was created as a factor in its aesthetic merit.

This brings us to questions of the value of systematizing art teacher experiences around students' work on fantasy topics like unicorns. The use of mythic imagery in curricula also connects the developing imagination with evolving aesthetic aims of teaching. In addition, for older learners, Galbraith and Grauer (2004) noted in their research of visual art education programs at the undergraduate and graduate level that few college curricula include substantial aesthetic inquiry. However, aesthetic inquiry applied to interest in mythic and playful characters like unicorns connects the enduring interest in fairy tales and mythology with an evolving sense of beauty and symbolism in art and literature.

Unicorn subject matter is quite pervasive among younger artists' works, and often reflects their experiences of complex aesthetic references from fairy tales, films, and works of art (e.g. Figure 3). Steele (2014) describes and provides photographs of elementary school children's common preoccupation with unicorns, inspired by unicorn tales. So too, unicorns appear in both the creative writing and verbal storytelling of elementary school students (Fleming, 1995). Unicorn drawings have recently been noted as common subjects in 3-4 year-old children in Turkey as well (Gündoğan, 2019).

Figure 3. Image of a unicorn painting by the author's daughter

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Ripstein (2018), a Reggio Emilia-inspired teacher, documents preschool student artwork and stories that included a rich exploration of unicorn imagery and fantasy tales. This example is particularly interesting in an intergenerational sense because adult educators and parents serve as co-creators alongside students by documenting the processes of young people. Art educators can extend this enduring interest through creative play in the classroom, inspired by both unicorns and educational philosophers like the aforementioned Reggio Emilia founder, Malaguzzi, or additional theorists addressed with greater depth in the following two sections: Frederich Froebel and Rudolf Steiner.

Folding and Framing Froebelian Unicorns in Art Education

Froebel was an educational theorist who is often credited with the invention of kindergarten. Speaking of matters relating to art education, Froebel and his followers encouraged a rich understanding of form for young people, through play, and careful observation, and often included intricate hands-on paper folding exercises. His beautiful teaching objects and creative exercises, explored by young learners alongside their adult caregivers as co-participants, are documented and preserved in many archives. These projects include wet-folding techniques in origami, as well as other projects centering on fantasy creatures like witches and unicorns.

Although Froebel's frameworks are not acknowledged in contemporary art classrooms; the ways in which his writing spoke directly to mothers and educators offers both a great deal. His hands-on practices of 'learning playfully' with objects from nature and the imagination notably included both horses and unicorns. His follower Susan E. Blow, referred to as the mother of kindergarten, observed:

> a toy is only a symbol, whereas it is the spiritual reality which the symbol suggests that allures the imagination . . . What the boy craves of his horse is that it shall waken a presentiment of his own power over nature . . . hence the child turns form to objects which by remotely suggesting an ideal heighten the activity of fantasy (Blow, 1899, p. 85).

This quote suggests the power of the unicorn as a symbol of imagination. Elsewhere, Cohen and Uhry (2011) addressed Froebel-inspired block play research groups, and noted children focused on block play to build a unicorn.

Integrating Froebelian principles in contemporary parenting, familylives.org, also outlines how his theories might be applied today more conceptually, with unicorns. This resource also emphasizes adults playing alongside children: "become a fellow unicorn with them trotting around . . . it will contribute to building that dad bond" (para 5). From our perspectives, this quote underscores the depth of young people's affinity for unicorns as objects and symbols of childhood. Given that Froebel wrote with mothers in mind, this contemporary shift acknowledging fatherhood and play also makes for a touching update acknowledging the whole family in art education and art creation around the unicorn theme.

Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf Education, and Unicorns

Like Froebel, Rudolf Steiner was an educational theorist and founder of Waldorf education

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with a deep interest in the arts as well as education, who also emphasized unicorns in his philosophies. His focus on fairy tales and mythology is echoed in contemporary Waldorf classroom materials, such as the folk tale collection aptly entitled, *The Coming of the Unicorn* (Williamson, 2012). The imagery-rich tales that are often read aloud by adults inspire the intricate traditions of watercolor painting and handcrafts common in Waldorf schools. Chalk drawings, watercolor paintings, and fiber projects are regularly created by adult arts, crafts, and classroom teachers alongside their PreK-12 students in Waldorf settings. Although Waldorf Education is often associated with private schools, components of its art-rich content are adaptable to other arts education settings. This adaptation is particularly observable in homeschool Facebook groups that connect practices of the family with holistic arts learning.

Waldorf articles and books today specifically approach the unicorn in a useful discursive way that parallels elements of the creative process of artists and young children, exploring for example, mythology alongside zoology in terms of the unicorn as a rich subject. Hundreds of current etsy.com links and related craft sites echo the ongoing connection between Waldorf projects in fiber, Waldorf-inspired wooden toys or puppets used in teaching and seasonal tables or classroom tableaus, and other handcraft projects common to Waldorf education honoring the unicorn in the family home or homey classroom as a fairy tale companion to the very real aspects of the seasons in the natural world.

Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) added the developmental dimension to this discussion of fairy tale unicorns, in that the horse, which appears prominently in so many female children's drawings, can express escape and movement within the creative growth of young girls, as, "a symbol of running, dashing freedom that is part of the joy of growing up" (p. 310). The horse is also widely significant in the feminist aesthetics of adult artists, with many female artists, such as Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), employing the horse symbol as an alter ego, signifying freedom and independence in both her self-portraiture and her surreal landscapes. As a fantastical form of the horse, unicorns stand for wildness and freedom, but also for powerful magic and mysticism within art from women of all ages.

Considering unicorns as extensions of horses in children's artwork illuminates their importance as enduring, enchanted symbols of wildness. Correspondingly, several young people in our workshop included drawings of mythic unicorns alongside real animals such as birds, showing a blurring of real and imagined creatures (e.g. Skophammer, 2008; Stonyk, 1998). Such blending of animal and myth demonstrates children's artistic focus not only on observable reality but also on feelings and stories through creative play. The similar array of real creatures alongside mythic beasts in the Unicorn Tapestries and other works reveals an iconographic link between art history and children's work as well.

Drawing influence from Waldorf art education and Froebelian art education in many media, art teachers can look to unicorns to inspire zoological drawing, painting, block play, origami traditions, craft work, and intricate classroom tableaus. Further, the endangered and imperiled situation of unicorns in mythology can serve as a metaphor for art educators' stewardship of our earth and other endangered creatures through investigation and participation in earthworks and eco-art, particularly for adolescent and adult learners. It is the rareness of unicorns that can serve as a metaphor for such ecological interests that may also be seen as niche, expressed through art education.

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Unicorn Media Performed, Reconsidered, and Remixed

Expanding upon art media focused on unicorns, the My Little Pony media franchises (1986, 2017) inspire a great deal of creativity among young and mature fans, often across generations and genders. They create unicorn costumes/makeup and "cos-play." These creative activities can relate to interesting questions about the quality of art curriculum in the classroom specific to areas of fashion and design. The art of such remix culture is intergenerational because of the very length of the series' popularity and its additional incarnations, engaging with "the aesthetics, appreciation, form, and composition dimensions of remix practices . . . centrally concerned with questions about what makes a remix good or of high quality" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p. 26). Notably, the My Little Pony franchise also complexly relates to inclusive gender expression within its sizable fan base of "bronies," or adolescent and adult males who relish the magical ponies.

On a related note, young people donning unicorn masks in unexpected public spaces have inspired a common internet meme, and even inspired the coining of a recent term, "unicorning" (Moye, 2013). Naidoo (2018) similarly observed the global network of Drag Queen Story Hour is included as a public service in New York public libraries and similar settings, and online during the pandemic. A drag queen performer reads children's books and shares songs as a creative performance exploring gender creativity. Naidoo also notes that drag queen performer Flo Leeta favored a unicorn costume that appealed to young children and was frequently captured in other news coverage. Meanwhile, elderly relatives have recently made news by donning unicorn costumes to practice social distancing, and also to safely embrace younger relatives (Storyful, 2020).

If approached as creative social acts, all these events and social media posts can be seen as part of intergenerational traditions of performance art, improv, and/or flashmobs. In addition, such actions express solidarity and advocacy for representation of inclusion and diversity. In this way, art teachers might compare unicorn-related performance art with guerrilla art forms pioneered by the Guerrilla Girls, an intergenerational, anonymous group founded in 1985 who advocate for broadening the scope of art history and gallery representation to include women and people of color (Weida, 2013), or Keri Smith (2012), who makes a case for guerrilla art acts in everyday life. Some artists have even taken up the term of "unicorn artist" to underscore their rareness through Facebook groups on this topic. Meanwhile, Unicorn Riot is a volunteer media collective of artists that produces grassroots journalism particularly highlighting the Black Lives Matter movement and news relating to Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) issues (Patterson, 2020). These remixes of the unicorn in public libraries, family reunions, guerilla art, and community journalism playfully and provocatively reframe shared art and action.

Universal Unicorns and Universes of Art Education

The spirit of the unicorn has metaphors across our communities and lifespans as art educators. Unicorns, with their enduring appeal, are also iconic warriors often pitted against lions, as is observable in the *Unicorn Tapestries*. This predicament can be somewhat familiar to those of us battling for a place for the arts in teacher education over the years, among an ever- crowded landscape of alternative approaches to the K-12 art room, such as programs composed solely of part-time teaching artists, or well-meaning interdisciplinary initiatives that

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persist in the absence of both art teachers and teaching artists. In our experiences as parents, professors, and teaching artists, we have often found unicorns to evoke both the timely and timeless elements of hope for art education advocacy as well as the problems and potential within its enduring contradictions and struggles.

Along these lines, there are some modern cult works of film and literature about unicorns that remain relevant and timeless as they possess unique appeal across the lifespan, and represent characters at different stages of life. For example, the 1982 animated film *The Last Unicorn* based upon Beagle's 1968 novel, centers on characters from young adulthood to advanced age. Subject of many remixed memes and blogs, the movie features a middle-aged female character who arguably serves as its heroine. Molly Grue, a middle-aged scullery woman, is infuriated when she meets the last unicorn. She feels bitterly cheated that she did not encounter this magical creature during her youth. The unicorn initially serves as a metaphor for a rude reckoning with her unrealized dreams, but Molly's character gradually develops as a wise woman, and strong counselor to others. Her own enduring unicorn nature, distinct from her lost youth, is realized. In parallel fashion, we might consider other works of art that similarly shift our attention from the unicorn itself to related meanings. Specifically, sculptor Jeanine Oleson's 2009 *Retribution*, is a circular gilded fence recreated from the *Unicorn Tapestries*, which rather than housing the elusive unicorn, serves as a sort of monument to the power of women to tame the unicorn and sustain its magic.

As Babić and Vekić (2018) provocatively proclaim, "the unicorn inherits the meaning of something incomprehensible, unattainable, something that does not exist in the real world, unreal and fantastical" (p. 163). Even if we cannot attain our most fanciful goals, cultivating enduring understanding of aesthetics, art history, and remix is an excellent means to define the legacy and longevity of our work. In addition, Cole et al. (1989) noted that in bestiary allegory, the unicorn is poised as a creature both fierce and noble, with the power of purifying and curing many afflictions. During a time in which some may seek healing balm for our troubled educational landscape in the midst of COVID-19, unicorns symbolize health and healing along with their enduring beauty, creativity, and magical qualities.

Finally, unicorns represent growth in that they are usefully changeable and yet enduringly powerful visual symbols for lifelong study. The chimera in the *Worksop Bestiary* in the Morgan Library is a hybrid animal with a weasel's head, lean blue greyhound's body, cloven hooves of a deer and a horn. The *Aberdeen Bestiary* in the Aberdeen Library, also from the medieval period, illustrates a horned miniature horse. Both represent the unicorn with the central recognizable aspect of its horn. Beyond more simplistic phallic references, this horn serves symbolically as a sort of magic wand for artists and art educators, symbolizing our reassuring ability to wield the richness of creative play, art historical inquiry, visual culture, and remix in our shifting practice as teachers and artists.

There is an enduring sense of nostalgia and of legacies in passing down the mysteries associated with the unicorn through art and education. In a study of parent writing workshops intended to support youth writing, DeFauw (2017) includes a letter from one mother to her daughter about the drawing of unicorns that earnestly captured an adult appreciation of a youthful artistic spirit:

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Dear Daughter . . .

> You know when you consintrate [sic] on a task, like drawing those spiders and snowmen, I'm thinking about when I drew my unicorns and sunsets. You should take the time to look at the world around you. If there are too many lights on at night, you might not see the stars and moon (p.33).

As we strive to become unicorn teachers and even unicorn artists, may we continue to stop and take the time to perceive unicorns in the artistic development of young people and embrace them within our shared learning landscapes. The unicorn represents valuable dualities that parallel the diverse scope and community of the field of art education itself: from innocence and wisdom, to reverence and irreverence, and high art and popular culture. The question that remains is this: where will the symbol of the unicorn as a lifelong companion lead you?

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